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ABSTRACT

English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) student writers are often labeled as having poor language proficiency skills, poor writing skills, and poor organizational skills. These labels can negatively affect teachers and students. They have become yardsticks for guiding teachers' instruction and measuring students' performance. Often, ESL writing teachers and researchers accept these labels without question, reflecting a lack of understanding about the characteristics of writing. These labels are the product of judging ESL writing by one measure only. This paper reveals a different identity for ESL student writers, looking at student English proficiency and student writing skills separately. It examines three curriculum designs (the grammar-translation method, audiolingual approach, and communicative approach), then it discusses the process oriented approach (also called the integrated or whole language approach), which treats all language activities holistically. This approach is rooted in cognitive psychology. By focusing on the process of writing rather than the product, ESL teachers and researchers can better understand their students' needs. (Contains 28 references.) (SM)

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Revealing the misunderstood identity of ESL/EFL writing students-from the perspectives of language proficiency and writing expertise

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ABSTRACT

ESL/EFL student writers used to have quite a few unflattering labels. The common ones are: poor language, poor writing skill, poor organization… et al. The strangest one this writer has heard is: lack of imagination. The issue about these labels is not if they are totally wrong or correct, but what part of the truth they are representing.

These labels can have negative effects on the instructors as well as students. The labels have become yardsticks with which to guide a teacher's instruction and measure a student's performance. More often than not, teachers and researchers in the EFL composition community simply take those labels without scrutiny. This reflects the lack of understanding about the characteristics of writing.

Instead of poring over the process of writing, or the problems concerning measurement, the EFL community has the habit of measuring an EFL student's composition against a model, which is often modeled from certain formats. Thus, in a sense, labels mean that striving to be like the "good writings" in itself equals the teaching and learning of how to write.

These labels are the convenient products of judging ESL/EFL compositions by one measure only. This paper intends to reveal a different identity of ESL/EFL student writers, through an approach that looks at a student's English proficiency and writing expertise separately. Thus, teachers and researchers in the field of ESL/EFL composition will have a more reasonable means of understanding a student's performance. When teachers know how students learn, they will feel more confident about how to teach.

Introduction

Writing is the ultimate challenge for ESL/EFL students. It puts all their training and skills to test. In addition to the frustration of witnessing a slow progress by themselves, ESL/EFL students also often face one more puzzling circumstance brought up by their teachers—unsettling comments.

Of course, teachers all make comments. The most common comments for ESL/EFL students center around: organization, language, writing skills. The most unconventional comments are: "lack of imagination or creative risk-taking" (Bayer, 1999) From the teacher's view, the comments are banal, to say the least. But to ESL/EFL students, some of these comments do not go well with their own literary experience. After all, the great majority of high school and college level ESL/EFL students have been immersed in their own mother tongue literacy for quite a while. In

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many cases, the same comment may not be applicable when writing in mother tongue.

In a sense, these comments brand a totally different identity on each student in the composition course. Worse of all, researchers and instructors in this business more often than not simply assume their comments are right and final. Therefore, the challenge for ESL/EFL English composition researchers and instructors is:

1. How reliable is the tools we use to come to assess ESL/EFL composition performance?
2. Do we and should we count in ESL/EFL students' mother tongue literacy skills in our assessment?
3. What is the essence of writing, anyway?

This paper intends to propose a more realistic approach to understanding ESL/EFL students' English composition performance by answering the following question:

Is what students put down on paper the true indicator of their writing capability?

Specifically, this paper attempts to understand: What constitutes writing performance?

A Background Review

We cannot understand fully our standing without tracing our roots. The current practices in ESL/EFL composition classrooms are conventions passed on and mixed with through the ages. Understanding the theoretical background of the past half a century can help us have a clearer idea about the origins of ESL/EFL composition practices.

The Tradition

The field of teaching ESL/EFL composition has never had a sound guideline. In

terms of teaching methods, evaluation schemes, or curriculum design, this profession has never had one that is on a sound theoretical basis. On surface, we can see that certain teaching methods have persisted through decades. On the other hand, no one method or curriculum design has been convincing or comprehensive enough to become an integral part of the curriculum.

The truth of the matter is that composition has seldom been an important part of the ESL/EFL curriculum design. Composition is part of the curriculum, but is seldom designed as an integral part of the curriculum. For the three dominant ESL/EFL curriculum designs during the past half a century, none treats composition as an integral part of its design. Instead, composition has been treated at most as a skill to be dealt with separately.

Let us first take a look at the three curriculum designs. By examining the rationale behind each approach, we will be able to see on what ground the ESL/EFL composition course has been conceived and taught. The three curriculum designs are: Grammar-Translation Method, The Audiolingual Approach, and The Communicative Approach[1].

Grammar-Translation Method

The Grammar-Translation Method was originally conceived in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In order to counter the then not so academically solid methods of the Natural Method, the Grammar-Translation Method was meant to make the subject-- foreign language-- more respectable.

We need to bear in mind that during then Latin was the ultimate language course.

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[1] For practical purposes, the Communicative Approach will not be discussed in this paper. Here I did not omit the Communicative Approach for its value or importance. Rather, the Communicative Approach, for all its value, concentrates primarily on oral communication. It has yet to appreciate the importance of reading, composition is obviously a far cry from its curriculum design. Consequently,

The classics were the model to be held against. Consequently, teaching grammar became a legitimate means to gain respectability among language scholars (Applebee, 1974; Howatt, 1991).

There are two primary features of the Grammar-Translation Method: one-by-one instruction of grammar and the translation of sample sentences. Often, the sample sentences are designed around the grammar instruction for students to practice what they have learned.

For a language curriculum design so keen on acquiring academic respectability, the content and the execution of the subject matter would have to take on a serious tone. Therefore, detailed explanation on grammar and constant practice on translating sentences either from or into the language becomes the focus of the course.

In a word, this method treats the subject—English as a foreign language-- more as knowledge to be imparted than as a living language to be learned. Consequently, this heavy bent on knowledge pushes the grammar instruction into explaining rules, exceptions, and irregularities all at the same time. The push toward a clear, accurate grammar instruction puts great stress on the curriculum design, the material, the instructor, and, ultimately, students.

On the other hand, the sentences for translation practice are to reinforce the points teachers made or to tax the language skills students have mastered so far. Though in its later evolution, short texts took the place of isolated sentences, neither the meaning of reading nor the skills of reading was ever integrated into the curriculum. Translating the English sentences into one's mother tongue or the other way around is still the primary function of the texts.

Any attempt to teach language as an intellectually challenging course would

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this writer decided that the Communicative Approach could wait for the future paper.

inevitably emphasize the content matter well above the consideration of the students. Rivers (1979) commented on the Grammar-Translation Method that it only cares about "What," "Why," and "How" of teaching, but is barely concerned with "Who" they are teaching. Howatt (1991) gave the following comments:

> Although the grammar-translation method started out as a simple approach to language learning for young schoolchildren, it was grossly distorted in the collision of interests between the classicists and their modern language rivals..... However, it also contained seeds which eventually grew into a jungle of obscure rules, endless lists of gender classes and gender-class exceptions, self-conscious 'literary' archaisms, snippets of philology, and a total loss of genuine feeling for living language (p. 136).

In a word, understanding grammar rules and practicing the application of those rules are the focus of the method. Production activities like writing and speaking are of secondary status. Under such circumstances, classics would have to be valued highly as the model for either course materials or the measurement of students' written or oral productions.

The Audiolingual Approach

The Audiolingual Approach has been the dominant guiding post for the ESL/EFL community for the past five decades. It was developed in the University of Michigan and widely-adopted by the ESL/EFL community throughout 1940's to 1970's. This approach "emphasized the teaching of correct oral language through the study of pattern practice, pronunciation, and grammatical structure" (Reid, 1993, p. 22). Savignon (1983) calls it a "new, scientific method based on the structural analysis of spoken language" (p. 17).

The Audiolingual Approach was derived from the then popular stimulus-response theory of behaviorism, the brainchild of B. F. Skinner. According to the Behaviorism, we can divide a subject into certain definable skills and learning can

take place in a step-by-step fashion, supported by negative or positive reinforcements. In essence, students learn in a highly structured environment.

The Audiolingual Approach was conceived in a unique background. It was a time when America was deeply involved in the world affairs, so the country needed to train its personnel the basic language skills of the target country where they were about to see service. The need called for a short, intensive, and scientifically effective language-training program. The primary goal was effective oral language skills. The Audiolingual Approach was thus conceived to meet such a need. It was never intended as a program for mastering the target language and culture.

There are three assumptions underlining such an emphasis on drills and practices (Reid, 1993):

> First, ...errors had to be prevented and eliminated. Students were taught correct language usage, and mistakes were viewed as deviant. Second, habituation of language was seen as the foundation of fluent language; if students inculcated structures through drilling, they would be able to use the structures without difficulty.... Third, oral language was seen as the pathway to language success, and fluency through reading, and particularly writing, were seen as tangential or "support" language skills (p. 22).

This approach demanded a considerable amount of work on aural-oral drills, based on the structures selected from a graded syllabus. The rationale is that language can be learned through mastering its linguistic patterns first. The patterns are organized by the structure of the language-- from the basic elements to the sentences. The patterns are mostly practiced in isolation, though sometimes some context is provided.

Proponents of the Audiolingual Approach advocate that students learn according to a well-monitored curriculum, through step-by-step practices. Accuracy is always the ultimate goal. Savignon (1983) proposes that students should acquire "a

basic set of grammatically correct utterances" (p. 67) before they are allowed to practice the newly acquired language in "authentic communication":

> There is no acknowledged training in real trial-and-error communication until the intermediate or even advanced levels of instruction. Not until they reach these levels are learners encouraged to be innovative in the use of language as they interact with native or near-native speakers. After having insisted on accuracy and rapidity of response in the beginning stages, the teacher is now confronted with the delicate task of guiding, without discouraging, the learners' first attempts at saying what they really want to say in the foreign language (p. 67).

This method, practicing the language without a social context, is plagued by its lack of spontaneity in both the teaching materials and activities. Critics fault its negligence on interactive communication (Howatt, 1991; Reid, 1993). Though it does emphasis practicing the language in authentic communication, it fails to convince critics on how it could bridge the gap between drills and practices and "authentic communication." Reid (1993) criticizes its negligence of writing activity as well as its reliance on the stimulus-response theory.

Impacts on Composition Instruction

Though designed for different purposes, the Grammar Translation Method and the Audiolingual Approach actually practice the same philosophy. As Howatt (1991) describes the two principles that these two methods are based upon:

> The first is that a language teaching course can be based on a sequence of linguistic categories, and the second that these categories can be exemplified in sample sentences for intensive practice (p. 141).

Since these two methods view teaching and learning English as ESL/EFL as a process of practicing carefully sequenced lessons, they naturally follow models or patterns that are correct. These methods put so much more emphasis on practicing correct models that their definition of learning is simply a matter of passive imitation and practice.

Active production, especially in written form, has not been integrated into the whole curriculum design. In other words, composition course under these types of curriculum design shares no fundamental values, no theoretical rationale, no solid guidelines. Composition has generally been viewed as a different course. Consequently, the guideline for teaching composition is to follow the correct models. Evaluating students' composition against good models seems to almost make good sense.

That is what this profession has referred to as the Product-oriented Approach. In essence, it follows good models that exemplify correctness and greatness and evaluates performance against those good models. Hairston (1982) gave an animated description of the Product-oriented Approach:

> First, its adherents believe that competent writers know what they are going to say before they begin to write; thus their most important task when they are preparing to write is finding a form into which to organize their content. They also believe... that teaching editing is teaching writing.... [T]he traditional paradigm did not grow out of research or experimentation. It derives partly from the classical rhetorical model that organizes the production of discourse into invention, arrangement, and style, but mostly it seems to be based on some idealized and orderly vision of what literature scholars, whose professional focus is on the written product, seem to imagine is an efficient method of writing. It is a prescriptive and orderly view of the creative act.... Its proponents hold it a priori; they have not tested it against the composing processes of actual writers (p. 78).

Specifically, the Product-oriented Approach evaluates a student's performance by the productions he/she puts in front of the instructor's eyes or ears. Both researchers and teachers normally just take whatever a student produces and make judgments about that student's strength and weakness (Chen, 1996; 1998). Therefore, not surprisingly, composition instructors comment on the content, the organization, the rhetoric, and the grammar. These all seemed natural enough.

But, is what we see on the page the true representative of an ESL/EFL student's

strength and weakness in composition? How confident should we be feeling about our tools of evaluation?

In her study, Zamel (1983) found two of her six "skilled" ESL students were re-classified as "unskilled" after their compositions were holistically graded. These two subjects had taken and passed two semesters of freshman composition courses. Stories like this misdiagnosed placement test are quite common in almost every ESL/EFL language program.

Raimes (1985) suggests that holistic assessment measures inevitably take a student's language proficiency into account. As a matter of fact, almost ev · y ESL/EFL composition evaluation scheme, to varying degrees, measures ESL/EFL student's language proficiency. The separate skills scoring method, such as the ESL Composition Profile, normally gives language proficiency at least 50 % of the weight. The ESL Composition Profile, developed by Jacobs, Zingraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel, and Hughey (1981), divides into five scoring categories. Three of the categories are "linguistic-specific assessment" (Raimes, 1985, p. 232). They are: Vocabulary (20%), Language Use (25%), and Mechanics (5%).

With methods leaning so much on language proficiency, how confident should we feel about comments like: "poor organization," "not clear," "poor editing"? Is what we see on the paper the true indicator of the student's strength and weakness? Specifically, is our view about writing and our idea of learning English as a second or foreign language theoretically sound?

A Different Approach

No Curriculum design can ever call itself a success without taking students into account. The Grammar Translation Method and the Audiolingual method became

popular and widespread, but they can never shake off the doubts on their effectiveness. Their separation of language into different skills-listening, speaking, reading, and writing-- and advocated focus on just one or two or them ultimately showed their weakness.

The Process-oriented Approach, on the other hand, treats all language activities as a whole. It claims to teach language, not one or two particular skills or knowledge. Therefore, it has been named: Integrated Language Approach or the Whole Language Approach. The Student-centered Approach is a natural byproduct of this approach.

The Process-oriented Approach is rooted in the cognitive psychology. The cognitive psychology guides the Process-oriented Approach in three ways (Chen, 1995):

1. Human beings learn and develop in a continuous interaction with their environment. Since development is an on-going process, each student's development to a large extent is closely associated with the environment he/she is in. Thus, Socialization and Interaction become the two pivotal activities of language learning. Specifically, we need to provide students with a language-rich environment so that students can constantly get in touch with language and interact with it (Britton, 1970; Moffett, 1968).
2. Thought develops simultaneously with language (Piaget, 1969; Vygotsky, 1962). Human beings' mental capacity develops and grows through language. Their mental capability in turn helps the language develop into higher levels. In a word, thought and language develop simultaneously. In the process of learning (Socialization) and using (Interaction) language, we broaden the scope of our leaning and refine what we have learned. In terms of language instruction, all language activities are integrated. Every activity or skill is

connected with other activities or skills.

3. Knowledge is refined through never-ending processes of construction and modification (Kelly, 1963; Piaget 1969). Barnes (1987) thinks that these processes "are transformations not additions" (p. 33). Human beings learn new knowledge not like simply adding on more blocks. Rather, by building on what we already know, we accommodate and adapt new information with our existing knowledge system (Piaget, 1969). Socialization and Interaction spur this process of accommodation and adaptation.

In terms of teaching ESL/EFL, learning new rules or new words is not a one-time effort. Assuming isolated practices can bring about a transformation of a language proficiency violates the basic belief of human cognitive psychology. Meaningful learning takes place by way of accommodation and adaptation in the context of Socialization and Interaction.

This transformation of knowledge takes place in each individual's mind only, so each student interprets and understands in his/her own unique way. Naturally enough, each student develops in his/her own pace. Therefore, the traditional academically sequenced curriculum design encounters a direct challenge of human psychology. In other words, can we expect a subject-centered curriculum design to be able to initiate transformation in each individual student?

A Different Way of Knowing

The traditional Product-oriented Approach relies on only one measure to evaluate a student's composition. No matter it is the score of a composition or the score of an English proficiency test, the score generally carries quite a weight with it. As this paper has shown, composition scores inevitably entangle language proficiency

with writing skills. The score gives an overall appraisal but not exactly how the student needs help.

A different approach to assessing students' writing performance as well as their instructional needs is to acknowledge that there are many factors involved in writing performance, let alone EFL composition (Chen, 1992, 1996; Raimes, 1985, 1987). Let us first look at what factors contribute to writing performance.

Vygotsky (1962) asserts that thought co-exists interdependently with language. Together, they help mold each other into being. Through interaction, language grows with language. Writing, according to Vygotsky, imposes such a difficult challenge that it tests a person's ability to generate ideas as well as to mold those ideas into words. Only through words can the ideas be coded and decoded. In words a reader sees only ideas. But for the writer, those words are the fruits of an interaction between language and thinking. Vygotsky asserts that this interaction is a never-ending process (1962):

> The relation of thought to word is not a thing but a process, a continual movement back and forth from thought to word and from word to thought. In that process the relation of thought to word undergoes changes which themselves may be regarded as development in the functional sense. Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them (p. 125).

Hence the term: "Process-Oriented Approach." Piaget (1969) voiced a similar opinion:

> ...there is a surprising degree of correlation between the language employed and the mode of reasoning....indicate that language does not constitute the source of logic but is, on the contrary, structured by it (p. 90).

During this process, a student first learns new language through "socialization" (Vygotsky, 1962). Through intensive and extensive contact with language, a student acquires the language code (Chen, 1992; Krashen, 1984) However, simply acquiring language code is not enough. Students gained a mastery of the language by

"interaction" (Vygotsky, 1962). They create meaning to interact with the surrounding environments. In this process of creating meaning, students refine and master the language code they have learned.

Following this line of thinking, Odell (1981) defined writing competence of native speakers as:

> ... the ability to discover what one wishes to say and to convey one's message through language, syntax, and content that are appropriate for one's audience and purpose (p. 103).

When examined closely, Odell's definition contains two parts:

1. "the ability to discover what one wishes to say": This refers to methods a writer employs during the process of writing to generate, organize, and edit whatever he/she wants to say. Some calls it writing expertise (Chen, 1992, 1996; Cumming, 1989), writing skills (Raimes, 1985, 1987; Zamel, 1983), or writing strategies (Jones, 1983).
2. "to convey one's message through language, syntax and content that are appropriate for one's audience and purpose": This is where one's language competence matters.

Krashen (1984), applying this line of thinking, went on to suggest two causes for the deficiency of some ESL/EFL writers:

1. Lack of acquisition of the code (written English).
2. A poor or inefficient composing process (p. 29).

In essence, the process-oriented approach sees writing as a creative process of immense perceptual, linguistic, and cognitive complexity in which meanings are made through the active and continued involvement of the writer with the unfolding text. Since student's linguistic and cognitive capabilities interact during the process of creation, this process is a fluid state. We, as researchers and teachers, should bear in

mind that there are two factors at work: language proficiency and writing expertise.

In essence, researchers and instructors need to sort out the two factors when studying students' composition. Thus, focusing on the process of writing instead of the product presented, we in the ESL/EFL composition profession can open a new channel to understanding our students' needs better.

Research Findings

As researchers focused on the writing process more, they found that students writing in a second language proceed in similar fashion as native speakers (Zamel, 1976; Jones, 1983). They all are engaging in a process of discovering and refining meanings. "Good ESL writers" according to Jones (1983), exhibit high amount of interaction with the text and they, too, "separated ideas from text", and shaped text while the low interactors simply "generated text" (p.135).

Furthermore, studies have found that ESL writers carry out similar process of writing in either native language (L1) or English (L2) (Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Raimes, 1987). Their writing strategies cross languages (Chen, 1992, 1996). Raimes (1985, 1987) concluded composing strategies are common to the ESL students across course placement and language proficiency levels and to L1 and L2 writers. Raimes (1985) concluded:

> With context, preparation, feedback, and opportunities for revision, students at any level of proficiency can be engaged in discovery of meaning (p. 250).

As more studies focused on the ESL writing process, the distinction between language proficiency and writing expertise emerged. One reason may be that as researchers examined the writing process more closely, they were able to detect more than one variable at work simultaneously. Their findings confirmed their long

suspicion about the inadequacy of evaluating and classifying ESL students' writings by one measure only (Chen, 1992; Raimes, 1985; Zamel, 1983). Raimes (1987) found language proficiency has little correspondence with judgments of writing ability and composing strategies. Chen (1992) found the TOEFL scores of his five subjects did not appear to be related with their writing process and editing activities.

Cumming (1989) formally proposed the separation of language proficiency and writing expertise: subjects with better native language writing expertise demonstrated more skilled process of writing in English. Subjects' second-language proficiency is only "an additive factor, enhancing the overall quality of writing produced, and interacting with the attention that participants devoted to aspects of their writing. But second-language proficiency did not visibly affect the processes of composing" (p. 81).

Crerand (1993), on the other hand, concluded that L2 learners do rely on L1 literary skills for L2 writing, and that L2 language proficiency, including oral skills, appears to affect L2 writing skills.

Chen (1992) asked five graduate Chinese subjects to write two topics in both English and Chinese and applied both statistical analysis and qualitative methods. Again, in 1996, Chen (1996) applied the same study on eleven subjects. His findings confirm that though English proficiency appears to be a significant factor in terms of writing process and editing activities, all subjects applied the same writing expertise all the time. Their writing activities like planning and revision and editing activities like delete, add, and change did not show noticeable difference in either language. Each subject clearly stated that during writing his/ her attention was on how to produce the text, seldom on the language factor.

In a further study, Chen (1999) focused on the relationship between the writing expertise of L1 and L2. He did a statistical study on the scores of eleven Chinese

subjects' compositions in both L1 (Chinese) and L2 (English). Each subject wrote 2 different topics in both L1 and L2. The compositions were then graded with a separate skills scheme, similar to the ESL Composition Profile, developed by Jacobs, Zingraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel, and Hughey (1981).

The statistical analysis found that there is a significant relationship between subjects' L1 and L2 compositions. Subjects' overall performance in English writing (total score) correlates with that of Chinese writing ($r=.428$, $p<.05$). Examined more closely, the total score of English writing correlates with the content of Chinese writing ($r=.526$, $p<.05$), whereas the total score of Chinese writing correlates with the grammar of English writing ($r=.466$, $p<.05$).

The conclusions from these studies are:

1. For ESL/EFL compositions, two primary factors are involved: language proficiency and writing expertise. Their writing expertise in L1 and L2 are closely related.
2. Their English proficiency works with their writing expertise. It facilitates or impedes the student's ability to utilize the writing expertise. Despite all the difficulty with language factor, almost every ESL/EFL student manages to focus on producing the content.

Almost every ESL/EFL student brings with them their previous literacy experience with their mother tongue. They apply the same skills in the ESL/EFL setting. Though their literacy skills can be impeded easily by their inadequate English proficiency, their previous literary experience has taught them concentrate on the text. Therefore, we can never restate enough of Zamel's (1983) conclusion:

> Finally, while there is some concern with language-related difficulties, these difficulties do not seem to interrupt the ongoing process, but rather are addressed in the context of making and communicating meaning (p. 180).

Conclusions

ESL/EFL students, particularly high school and college level students, are not totally ignorant of many of the conventions associated with writing. Similar to students in every culture, some can read and write better than other fellow students. When asked to write in English, these students have to struggle with how to use English as a tool to think and to express.

Studies have shown that their English language proficiency is closely associated with their ability to apply their skills or expertise learned in mother tongue. ESL/EFL students' less than perfect English language proficiency just becomes a burden to their writing expertise and keeps truncating their writing process. In essence, we can divide ESL/EFL into four basic categories:

1. Good English proficiency, good writing expertise.
2. Good English proficiency, poor writing expertise.
3. Poor English proficiency, good writing expertise.
4. Poor English proficiency, poor writing expertise.

Consequently, when looking at an ESL/EFL student's English composition, we can no longer be satisfied with judgments made on basis of over-all impressions. Researchers and instructors will have to be able to look through the text and distinguish language proficiency factor from writing expertise factor. In other words, we need to make separate judgments so that we will have greater confidence about the kind of help a student needs.

If researchers and instructors are able to separate language factor from the writing expertise factor, they will learn to appreciate each student's unique strength and weakness. Instead of dispensing labels that assign a confusing identity, our renewed

understanding of ESL/EFL students' composition performance can lead to a more open interaction between instructors and students.

Implications

When researchers or instructors declare that a certain student is "unskilled" or shows "poor organization," they are sticking a label on that student. So often in classrooms, instructors wield this power without much deliberation on the reliability of their tools of judgments. Little, too, have they ever given much thought about the labeling effect on the struggling ESL/EFL students who are earnestly praying and waiting for guidance—how would we feel when some authority declares that we "lack of imagination"?

The ignorance of ESL/EFL students' mother tongue literacy capability amounts to a sin of negligence on the part of researchers and instructors. This ignorance only serves to dampen the effect of instruction and cast doubts on students' minds. Therefore, a healthy respect for each student's previous literary experience helps a lot. Furthermore, the ability to look through the faulty language for clues of strength and weakness will enable everyone in this profession to have a much clearer and more open interaction with students.

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